

Saint Anselm and the Problem of Evil, or On Freeing Evil From the “Problem of Evil”

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses one of the crucial metaphysical presuppositions of the contemporary problem of evil: the belief that evil is that which a good thing *must* eliminate, or to be more precise, that evil is that which God *must* eliminate. The first part analyzes J. L. Mackie’s atheological argument in “Evil and Omnipotence.” The second part analyzes the reasons why Saint Anselm rejected the claim that God must eliminate evil in his *De Casu Diaboli*. The article’s goal is not just raise crucial questions with respect to contemporary approaches to evil. It is also to reflect with Saint Anselm upon one of the genuine *aporiai* posed by existing evils: how does one remove them?

THE CONTEMPORARY “PROBLEM OF EVIL” seems to have very little to do with the problem that Saint Anselm thought that “evil” poses for the Christian thinker.¹ To the contemporary, the “problem of evil” has become a shorthand of sorts for what appears to be a very modern problem: determining if and how evil—that is, existing evil—is (and should be thought of as) a sufficient ground for denying the rationality of belief in the existence of God. To medieval thinkers, including Saint Anselm, on the other hand, the problem posed by evil primarily concerned evil itself: its origin, its cause, its ontological status, its nature—if indeed it could be said to have one.

The contemporary “problem of evil” regards God directly. Its central concern is a paradox concerning the relation between existing evil (which it primarily identifies with suffering) and an omnipotent good being: if no good being can witness evil of any kind without attempting to eliminate it, and if an omniscient and omnipotent being would necessarily both witness all existing evil, and be capable of eliminating evil of any kind, then how can it be rationally conceivable for a good, omniscient, and omnipotent Creator, who would allow His own creation to be infested by evil, to exist?

The medieval problem of evil, on the other hand, primarily regards creation. Its central concern is a paradox concerning the relation between things’ natures and their actions: if there is nothing—no constituent characteristic, quality, property, or principle—in any creature that was not given to that creature by its perfectly good and omnipotent Creator, and if every good being must by nature want and act to attain what is good, then how can evil exist at all? Boethius gave the medieval

¹I am grateful to John Kronen, friend and colleague, who, upon hearing that I wished to write about the problem of evil and Saint Anselm, insisted that I give a very good look at *De Casu Diaboli*.

problem its most succinct formulation: *Si quidem Deus, unde mala?* (If God exists, whence comes evil?).²

The contemporary “problem of evil” has called for theistic thinkers principally to reflect upon an ethical issue: the possible “morally sufficient reasons” that God might have for permitting evil (suffering) to exist and persist. These sufficient reasons, it is thought, would justify the co-existence of God and evil, and consequently the rationality of belief in God’s existence. The problem evil posed for medieval thinkers, on the other hand, principally called for reflection upon a metaphysical issue: the possible causes (and modes) of creaturely rejection of God, and the ontological conditions and consequences of this rejection. These causes, conditions, and consequences, it was thought, would explain the presence and persistence of evil in a universe created and sustained by God.

As poignant as both the medieval and contemporary problems of evil are, the problem that Saint Anselm thought that evil is for the Christian thinker has very little to do with the contemporary problem of evil. What possible bearing can the ontological status of evil have upon the rationality of belief in the existence of a good, omniscient, and omnipotent God? Evil, it would seem, is a problem for theistic belief, no matter what it is. For whatever evil is, its existence would by definition seem incompatible with that of a good and omnipotent Creator. How can reflection upon the relation between a thing’s nature and its acts make a non-indifferent yet non-interventionist good, omniscient, and omnipotent God any more conceivable? Whatever the ontology of a being’s acts, the fact remains that the effects of creaturely acts are all too often evil, and the existence of evil effects, effects that injure God’s own creation, it would seem, is simply incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and good God. What can the ontological conditions and consequences of creaturely rejection of God tell us about God’s morally sufficient reasons for allowing creaturely suffering? Explaining how or why creatures might reject God, it would seem, does not explain why a good and omnipotent God would allow His creatures to suffer. It does not explain how evil can be reconciled with God, or with belief in God. Thus, medieval reflections upon evil seem futile when it comes to the contemporary problem of evil. This might explain why the medieval approach to evil has played such a minor role in the contemporary discussion of evil.³

² *Consolatio Philosophiae*, I.5.105–06. Boethius may have drawn his question from Epicurus. It is interesting to note that many contemporary thinkers believe that Epicurus’s statement is an ancient formulation of the modern problem of evil. See, e.g., Steven Cahn, *God, Reason, and Religion* (Belmont CA: Thompson/Wadsworth), p. 9.

³ Gillian Evans gives a wonderful sketch of the contrast between these different ways of approaching the problem of evil in her *Augustine on Evil* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), pp. ix–x: “Whether or not we regard his [Augustine’s] monumental achievement [with respect to the problem of evil] as a satisfactory answer to the problem depends on where we believe the real problem of evil lies. . . . The problem of evil must be either God-centered or man-centered. We may regard Hell as an estrangement of man from God. . . . The alternative to the view that man is the source of evil (and that it is man that we must examine if we are to understand what evil is and what it does) is the view that God is helpless in the face of an evil that threatens him—or else himself the source of an evil that would seem to contradict his very nature.”

And yet, appearances can be deceptive. In this case, they certainly are. One must accept a number of presuppositions in order to be able to construe existing evils as positive evidence for denying the rationality of belief in the existence of a good, omnipotent, and omniscient God. These presuppositions are sundry. Clearly, some are epistemic: they regard such things as the necessary requisites of rational beliefs, the proper content of human beliefs, and the domain of rational beliefs.⁴ Some are ethical, and they include such beliefs as the notion that God, or any other omnipotent being who could eliminate evil, is morally responsible for the existence of evil.⁵ Some of these presuppositions are metaphysical, and include such beliefs as that evil is destructible, that evil is a positive property, that evil can be equated with pain and suffering, and that God can eliminate evil (pain and suffering) of any kind. It is these presuppositions, and others like them, upon which medieval thinkers primarily reflected when contemplating the problem of evil. And medieval thinkers often vigorously argued against them. This is especially true of the problem's metaphysical presuppositions. The medieval rejection of these presuppositions certainly made the medieval problem of evil appear to be very different from the contemporary one. But the fact that the medieval approach to evil concerned the very presuppositions that inform the contemporary approach also entails that the medieval approach to evil has everything to do with the contemporary problem of evil: it deals with the conditions of its emergence.

Volumes could and should be written about this point.⁶ My goal in this paper is much more modest. With the help of Saint Anselm I would like to address one of the crucial metaphysical presuppositions of the contemporary problem of evil. The belief that evil is that which a good thing *must* eliminate (i.e., destroy); or, to be precise, that evil is that which God *must* eliminate (i.e., destroy).

In the first part of the paper I shall show why this presupposition is essential to the contemporary problem of evil in its logical form. I shall address the version of this problem by the neo-Humean J. L. Mackie. In the second part, I shall attempt to show why Saint Anselm rejected this presupposition in his *De Casu Diaboli*. My goal is not just to that this rejection raises crucial questions with respect to contemporary approaches to evil. It is also to reflect with Saint Anselm upon one of the genuine aporiai posed by existing evils: how does one remove them?

⁴On this point see, e.g., David O'Connor, "On the Problem of Evil's Not Being What it Seems," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987): 441–47; F. J. Fitzpatrick, "The Onus of Proof in Arguments about the Problem of Evil," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 25–27; Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–93; Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 135–65.

⁵On this point see, e.g., Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," *The Philosophical Review* 72 no. 2 (April 1963): 180–97.

⁶Marilyn McCord Adams makes the reason for this quite plain in her *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), p. 15: "In my view, Mackie and his fellow atheologians found theism an easy target precisely because they were unacquainted with the details and subtleties of more particular traditions."

1. EVIL: ITS NATURE AND ELIMINABILITY—A CONTEMPORARY VIEW

J. L. Mackie and the Logical “Problem of Evil”

In contemporary circles, the *problem of evil* has come to designate that family of arguments that emerge from a set of propositions made famous by J. L. Mackie's widely read argument:

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) God is wholly good.
- (3) Evil exists.

All the arguments of this sort concern the existence of God and the tenability of religious belief. Mackie himself claimed that “the problem of evil” is primarily a logical one. There seems to be “some contradiction,” he asserts in “Evil and Omnipotence,” between the three propositions above: “if any two of them were true, the third would be false.” And yet, he contends, all three propositions are “essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and yet *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.” Mackie took this to mean that anyone who adheres to all three of the propositions is guilty of holding a logically inconsistent set of beliefs. Having already pointed out that all three propositions are “essential to most theological positions”—that theologians “*must* adhere” to all three—Mackie concludes that “most theological positions” must be “logically inconsistent.” This logical inconsistency, he adds, shows “not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational,” and consequently that

the theologian can maintain his position as a whole only by a[n] . . . extreme rejection of reason. . . . He must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be *disproved* from other beliefs that he also holds.⁷

Having made this startlingly strong claim, Mackie admits that his three propositions do not “immediately” yield the “inconsistency” that he describes. He quickly adds, however, that one need only to specify the “rules connecting the terms ‘good,’ ‘evil,’ and ‘omnipotent,’” in order to reveal that inconsistency/contradiction. These rules, or “principles,” he claims, are two:

- (4) A good thing is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
- (5) There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

“From these,” he claims, it “follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely.” This, in turn, would show that “the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.”

⁷J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–12. My citations of the text on this page are all drawn from pp. 200 and 201.

Mackie's argument is typical of the tradition of a-theological arguments that was begun by Hume⁸ and that continues to thrive today. These arguments would all retain both the explicit and implicit propositions of Mackie (i.e., Hume). They would share his belief that these propositions express the means with which to deny both the existence of God and the tenability of religious belief. They have changed in tone since Mackie's time. The contention of many of the current a-theological arguments concerning the "problem of evil" is that evil makes for an evidential (rather than a logical) case against the existence of God. The true belief that evil exists, these latter arguments assert, does not directly contradict or *disprove* the belief that God is omnipotent and wholly good, and thereby vitiate theological belief from within. Rather, they claim, the concrete and abundant actually existent evils that can be found in the world constitute a *prima facie* case against the existence of God. Michael Martin gives a succinct formulation of this second sort of argument.⁹

In what follows, I will concentrate on Mackie's logical a-theological argument, as opposed to evidential ones. This is simply for reasons of expedience. The questions that Saint Anselm raises with respect to evil are applicable to both sorts of arguments.

Mackie's Presuppositions

Mackie's argument has a number of significant presuppositions, and many theistic thinkers have written about some of the more significant ones. Nelson Pike, for instance, claimed that "good," as Mackie (and Hume) used it in (2) "God is wholly good," refers to moral goodness, while "evil," as Mackie (and Hume) used it in (3) "Evil exists," refers primarily to suffering. Thus, he concluded, Mackie's (and Hume's) argument would claim that no "omnipotent and wholly morally good" being could allow any instance of suffering to subsist, and continue to be an "omnipotent and wholly morally good."¹⁰ Plantinga, on the other hand, has shown that Mackie's definition of "omnipotence" in (5) "There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do" is simply erroneous. There are necessarily limits to what an omnipotent being can do. No omnipotent being can do what is logically impossible. No

⁸Pike, "Hume on Evil," p. 181: "John Stuart Mill, J. E. McTaggart, Antony Flew, H. D. Aiken, J. L. Mackie, C. J. Ducass, and H. J. McCloskey are but a very few of the many others who have echoed Philo's finalistic dismissal of traditional theism after making reference to the logical incompatibility of 'God exists' and 'There occur instances of suffering.' W. T. Stace refers to Hume's discussion of the matter as follows: . . . 'The simultaneous attribution of all-power and all-goodness to the Creator of the whole world is logically incompatible with the existence of evil and pain in the world.'"

⁹Michael Martin, "Is Evil Evidence against the Existence of God?" *Mind* 87 (1978): 429–32. While there is, Martin states, "no positive evidence that God exists," evil "in great abundance would falsify the existence of God unless one assumes either that God has sufficient reason for allowing the existence of evil in great abundance or that evil in great abundance is logically necessary." But, he continues, there is no reason to hold that either of these assumptions is reasonable. "Apologists down through the ages have failed to specify a sufficient reason for God allowing evil." And this track record, he adds, should suffice to show that there can be no such sufficient reason: "if every attempt to specify a needed explanation fails over a long period of time this failure gives one good grounds to suppose that an explanation is impossible." Thus, he concludes, "On rational grounds one should believe that God does not exist." My citations of the text have been drawn from pp. 430 and 431.

¹⁰Pike, "Hume on Evil," e.g., pp. 180–81.

omnipotent being can, for instance, create free beings whose actions he determines, or significantly controls.¹¹

Both Pike and Plantinga have used these presuppositions of Mackie to shed light on some of the weaknesses of his argument. Pike demonstrated that it is false to claim that no “omnipotent and wholly morally good” being could allow any instance of suffering to subsist, and continue to be an “omnipotent and wholly morally good,” since a morally good being can have a morally sufficient reason for permitting some instances of suffering.¹² Plantinga, on the other hand, uses the fact that omnipotence does not mean that “there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do” as a way to formulate his “free will defense” and thereby to wo[ll] how that, Mackie to the contrary, it is not at all logically inconsistent to hold that God exists, is omnipotent and good, and that evil exists.¹³

In spirit similar to the writings of Pike and of Plantinga, I would like here to analyze Mackie’s concept of evil itself—what he thinks evil actually is—and to shed some light on its metaphysical presuppositions. I realize that mine is not a common concern today. There seems to be somewhat of a consensus among the majority of contemporary thinkers that what evil is, the nature of evil, is self-evident, or should not be questioned in context of the problem of evil.¹⁴ Common or not, mine is an issue that needs to be addressed both in itself and in the context of the problem of evil. This not just because it is not at all clear that the nature of evil is self-evident,¹⁵ although evil’s self-evidence (or lack thereof) is certainly significant with respect to the inferences that one can immediately draw from the existence of evil. To be clear, it does not seem appropriate unapologetically to call upon that which is not self-evident to serve as evidence for anything, including the non-existence of God. There is a more significant matter at stake with respect to the nature of evil: one’s concept of evil determines the problems that one thinks that evil poses.

Mackie is no exception to this. His conception of evil would seem to be one of the primary causes of his claim that existing evil is logical evidence for holding the

¹¹Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1974) 164–93.

¹²Pike, “Hume on Evil,” p. 183: “Thus, it does not follow from the claim that God is perfectly good that he would prevent suffering if he could. God might fail to prevent suffering or himself bring about suffering, while remaining perfectly good. It is required only that there be a morally sufficient reason for his action.”

¹³Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 189: “If every creaturely essence suffers from transworld depravity, then it was beyond the power of God himself to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil. . . . But it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity; so it is possible that God could not have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil.”

¹⁴See, on this point, e.g., Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 29: “If defeated evils were just apparently and not really evil, we could not be sure whether anything was evil or not. We pay tribute to the seriousness of evils by respecting our own epistemic confidence that their negative value is evident.”

¹⁵I have defended this point in “Is Evil a Primitive?” in *Social Justice: Its Theory and Practice. Proceedings of the ACPA* 79 (2006): 157–71. I am not the only one who raises this point. Terence Penelhum makes a related one. See, “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil” in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marylin McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press), p. 76: “It should be emphasized that ‘evil’ is also an evaluative term. It is frequently said that observation will establish that the world contains evil. This is no doubt true, but the judgment that certain observed facts in the world are to be classed as evils, is an evaluative judgment, however much the presence of those facts is established by observation.”

non-existence of God. By questioning what evil is, as such, one can ascertain if it really poses the problem that Mackie claims that it does.

Mackie and the “Rules Connecting the Terms ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’”

Two of the five propositions in Mackie’s argument delineate three of the four essential (i.e., necessary) properties that he believes evil to have:

- (a) Evil is existent (i.e., it is minimally a positive property that is uncontroversially instantiated in our world)—from (3).
- (b) Evil is what good must *eliminate* (i.e., it is “something to which a good thing is so *opposed* as to *eliminate* it as much as it can”—from (4).
- (c) Evil is eliminable (i.e., destructible) by good—from (4).

There is a fourth property to add to this list:

- (d) Evil must eliminate good (i.e., it is *really opposed* to good).

The logical relations between these properties are as crucial for understanding Mackie’s conception of evil as are the properties themselves. As we shall see, Mackie has what might be called an *antagonistic view* of good and evil. Good and evil, he believes, are “mutually opposed forces,” each necessarily bent towards the elimination of the other. Thus, he considers (b) and (d) to be the *properly basic* properties of evil. He considers (a) to be a necessary requisite of both (b) and (d), and (c) to be a necessary requisite of (b).

Mackie does not say much about the third property of evil *per se*. He obviously considers evil to be necessarily destructible, else he would not claim that the existence of an omnipotent good God is “incompatible” with the existence of evil. He does not, however, specify how evil can be eliminated, or what this elimination would entail. He seems to think that these matters are self-evident.

Mackie is a bit more forthcoming in his description of the remaining three properties of evil. With respect to the first, (a) that “evil exists,” he specifies that “evil” should be thought of as a “quality” in things, or alternatively as an “intrinsic feature of things” (p. 204). He does not further qualify this point by articulating what quality he believes evil to be, or how this quality inheres in things—what it means for evil to be an “intrinsic feature” of things.¹⁶ He apparently thinks it self-evident that evil is a primitive and positive property that is uncontroversially instantiated in a set of readily recognizable things, properties, or states of affairs, like “pain,” which he claims can be thought of as a first order evil (p. 206), or “malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice,” which he claims can be thought of as second order evils (p. 207).

¹⁶That is, he does not specify such things as whether he believes that “evil” should be predicated of the things themselves in which it inheres—as in “Stalin is evil”—or if it is only to be predicated of the property that inheres in those things that we think of as evil—as in “Stalin’s cruelty is evil.” This point might seem trite, but it is of crucial importance with respect to the matter of the “elimination” of evil. Eliminating Stalin is clearly very different from eliminating Stalin’s cruelty.

Mackie admits that his view that evil is a positive property has been challenged: “some have said that what we call evil is merely the privation of good, that evil in a positive sense, evil that is really opposed to good, does not exist” (p. 201). He also admits that the challenging view would make for an “adequate solution to the problem of evil” (p. 201). But he then simply dismisses the claim that evil is a privation, asserting that those who adopt it might not do so completely (p. 201), or indeed that they might reify privations—think that “privations of good is *an evil*” (p. 202).

Mackie’s real reason for dismissing the claim that evil is a privation seems to derive from his beliefs that: (b) “evil is something to which a good thing is so *opposed* as to eliminate it as much as it can,” and (d) that “evil is *really opposed* to good.” The mutual opposition between good and evil seems to be what he considers the most elementary fact about evil.¹⁷ He seems to think it absurd to believe that evil can be thought of in a way that would entail that good and evil are not *really* mutually opposed. Thus, since he seems to assume that one of the necessary conditions of real opposition is that those things that are opposed be minimally positive realities—that *real* opposition cannot obtain between good and evil if one of the two is not a positive property¹⁸—he concludes that evil cannot be a privation: that it is absurd to hold that “evil that is *really opposed* to good, does not exist.”

That this is Mackie’s reason for rejecting the claim that evil is a privation can be surmised from his responses to what he calls “fallacious solutions” to the problem of evil (p. 202). He dismisses the claim that “Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good” (a claim with which various thinkers have attempted to solve the problem of evil) because “this solution denies that evil is opposed to good in our original sense” (p. 204). The opposition between evil and good, he then explains, cannot be that of logical or necessary “counterparts” because in this case “good would not eliminate evil as far as it can” (p. 204). Rather, he asserts, that opposition must be thought of as one between “mutually opposed forces” (p. 204), each of which, one supposes, necessarily aims at the elimination of the other.

In his response to the claim that “the universe is better with some evil in it than it could be if there were no evil” (p. 206), Mackie concedes that it might be possible to think of the opposition between good and evil along the lines of a “more complex pattern,” according to which (b) and (d) would not be necessary properties of evil. The pattern would call for different orders of good and evil. It would make each successive order of good and evil qualitatively more significant than the previous one. And it would make good and evil of each previous order causally and logically necessary “conditions” or “components” respectively of evil and good of the successive order. Thus, it would call for: both “first order good,”

¹⁷One can find a similar claim in Rosamond Kent Sprague “Negation and Evil,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 11 (1951): 564. “The metaphysician does not ask himself if there is evil in the universe, or if so, why . . . He merely recognizes it as an ever-present feature of reality. . . . Consequently, the aspect of evil that is of most interest to the metaphysician is the ontological aspect, since this type of evil that which most clearly expresses the characteristic of opposition to the good.”

¹⁸Sprague puts this point clearly too, p. 561: “There is much comfort in the thought that evil is somehow negative and that good is really the predominant factor in the universe, but if . . . negation is basically a principle of opposition, to call evil “negative” is as much as to say that evil is “more opposite” than good. This is plainly ridiculous as is evident from the fact that the relation of opposition is one that requires two terms.”

which is instantiated in such states as happiness, and “first order evil,” which is instantiated in such states as misery, which “*contrasts with*” happiness. To this it would add that there is a “second order good” that is instantiated in such qualities as benevolence. This second order good, benevolence, tries “to maximize” first order good (happiness) and “minimize” first order evil (misery). It requires first order evil (misery) as a causally and “logically necessary component.” It is “more important than” first order good (happiness) and first order evil (misery) (p. 208). Mackie also allows for a “third order good,” which, he claims, would be exemplified in God’s goodness, and is the “will to maximize *second* order good” (p. 207). On this account, then, good necessarily does not “eliminate evil as far as it can,” just as evil necessarily does not eliminate good as far as it can. The “pattern” would make first order evils necessary conditions of second order goods, and first order goods necessary conditions of second order evils.

Mackie admits both that this account of the “way in which good is opposed to evil” differs from his original one, and that “it might well be an improvement” on it (p. 207), i.e., “give a more accurate description of the way in which good is opposed to evil.” It would thus appear that he is admitting that (b) and (d) may not be necessary properties of evil: that the opposition between good and evil need not be between “mutually opposed forces” each necessarily bent upon the elimination of the other.

Yet this is not so. In Mackie’s view, even this revised account requires the *real* opposition between good and evil: third order good’s “maximization” of second order good, he claims, demands the *elimination* of second order evil. His reasoning is this. Although the improved description of the opposition between good and evil would allow for the co-existence of first order evil and God—since it would make first order evil a necessary requisite of second order good, which God would “will to promote”—it must necessarily also allow for “second order evil,” instantiated in such properties as “malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice” (p. 207). But second order evil, he continues, would necessarily maximize first order evil, and minimize first order good. As a result, Mackie concludes, God would necessarily eliminate “second order evil”:

Just as good (2) [second order good] is held to be the important kind of good, the kind that God is concerned to promote, so evil (2) [second order evil] will, by analogy, be the important kind of evil, the kind which God, if he were wholly good and omnipotent, would eliminate. (pp. 207–08)

It is not quite clear why Mackie believes that the maximization or “promotion” of second order good necessarily involves the elimination of second order evil on this account of the opposition of good and evil. His abrupt conclusion that it does seems to contradict the nature of the opposition between good and evil, for which the pattern itself calls. To be clear, on this pattern first order evil is what allows for—is a necessary causal and logical condition of—second order good. This means that the pattern would necessarily make the maximization of first order evil the maximization of possibility of second order good, and the minimization of first order evil the minimization of the possibility of second order good. Thus, if second order

evil maximizes first order evil, as Mackie hypothesizes, it would necessarily also maximize the possibility of second order good. What is more, the elimination of second order evil would necessarily also entail the minimization of the possibility of second order good. If this were so, however, then third order good whose “will is to maximize *second* order good” could in no way want to eliminate “second order evil” in order to maximize, or “promote” any “second order good,” unless, of course, that good were not omniscient or good, which is *ex hypothesi* absurd! Thus, it is odd that Mackie claims that on this account of the opposition between good and evil an omnipotent good God, who would “will to promote second order good” would necessarily eliminate second order evil. Perhaps, it is the precisely fact that he holds (and wishes to establish) that (b) is a necessary property of at least some evil that leads him to do so.

Whatever Mackie’s reason for departing from a “pattern” of opposition between good and evil, which he is apparently willing to accept, what is clear is that he has an *antagonistic* view of good and evil. That is, he believes that evil is one of two “mutually opposed forces,” the other being the good, and consequently that evil must primarily be: (b) what good necessarily eliminates and (d) what necessarily eliminates good. This antagonistic view clearly involves that (a) evil be existent (a positive and instantiable property). Antagonism, or what Mackie would call, “real opposition,” can apparently only obtain between positive realities. In Mackie’s view it also entails that (c) evil is eliminable.

2. EVIL: ITS NATURE AND ELIMINABILITY—A MEDIEVAL VIEW

Mackie’s *antagonistic* view of evil plays a crucial role in his a-theological argument. It is, as he himself acknowledges when he introduces the supplementary propositions that would specify the “rules connecting the terms ‘good,’ ‘evil,’ and ‘omnipotent,’” a necessary condition of the contradiction between the propositions “God is good,” “God is omnipotent,” and “evil exists.” Nor could it be otherwise, for if evil is not that which good *must* eliminate, it can hardly be contradictory to assent to all three of Mackie’s propositions. Granted the importance of Mackie’s *antagonistic* view of evil, then, is it tenable?

Saint Anselm would hardly have thought so, and for a plethora of reasons. He thought that the claim (d) that evil is what necessarily eliminates good was simply false.¹⁹ He openly rejected (a) that evil is a positive property,²⁰ independently of his beliefs that evil cannot be (b) what good necessarily eliminates and (d) what necessarily eliminates good, and consequently he denied one of the conditions of the possibility of both (b) and (d). He would seriously have quibbled with (c) that evil is *per se* eliminable, precisely because he rejected (a).

¹⁹Cf., e.g., *De Casu Diaboli* [hereafter DCD], chap. 4: *Nihil autem [Diabolus] velle poterat nisi iustitiam aut commodum. Ex commodes enim constat beatitudo, quam vult omnis rationalis natura* [“but (the Devil) was able to will nothing except what is just or beneficial. For happiness, which every rational nature wills, consists of benefits”].

²⁰Cf., e.g., *De Casu Diaboli*, chaps. 10 and 11, where Anselm deals precisely with this point. See also, Desmond Paul Henry, “Saint Anselm and Nothingness,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1965): 243–46.

What would have been much more important to Saint Anselm than showing why none of the properties with which Mackie characterizes evil is a proper attribute of evil, however, is showing why Mackie's *antagonistic* view of good and evil—the conjunction of (b) and (d), which defines evil and good as “mutually opposed forces” and necessarily calls for evil to be a positive (and eliminable) property—altogether misconstrues both what good and evil are and their relations. The antagonistic view, he would have thought, makes evil both indistinguishable from the good, and a necessary requisite of the good. That is, were good and evil really “mutually opposed forces” necessarily bent upon the elimination of one another, then good and evil would both necessarily be destructive forces. What would distinguish them, as such, would not be one of their intrinsic or substantial properties, but one of their extrinsic or accidental features: that towards which their destructiveness is directed, the object of their destruction.²¹ But this would make good and evil *per se* indistinguishable. Again, if *real* opposition, as Mackie claims, can only obtain between good and evil on the supposition that both are actually existent, then the claim that good is necessarily *really* opposed to evil would make the actual existence of evil a necessary condition of the actual existence of the good. Anselm would vehemently have opposed both of these points.

That which is good, Anselm would have claimed in response to Mackie, cannot possibly be bent towards the elimination of anything; otherwise God, who is the Supreme Good, would not be a Creator. To create is not to eliminate, to destroy. Quite the contrary, it is to give life: to make to exist that which is not. Were good a destructive force, Anselm would consequently have argued, the Supreme Good would not have created anything at all. But this is absurd. Creation does exist. Thus, good does not eliminate; rather, it makes “*all* other things to be something and in some respect to fare well.”²² And the Supreme Good, God, is a Creator, precisely because good makes all things to be. As that which makes “*all*” things to be something, good is the condition of the possibility of the existence of all that is. As a result, Anselm would have argued, the actual existence of evil cannot be a necessary condition of the actual existence of good, as Mackie's *antagonistic* account would require. Even if one does grant that it is a “force,” which Anselm would not, it is clear that evil could not exist if not from the good. Consequently, Anselm would have argued, it necessarily is subsequent to the good.

The first chapter of the *De Casu Diaboli* is ideal for showing both why Saint Anselm would have rejected Mackie's antagonistic view of good and evil, and why he thought that that view misconstrues both the nature of the good and the relation between good and evil. Anselm's intent in that chapter is to establish that God cannot be the cause of “not being.” This is, of course, an indirect refutation of

²¹Cf. on this point, Sprague, “Negation and Evil,” p. 561: “Since good and evil constitute one of the most famous pairs of such opposites, they too fall within the province of negation. They do so primarily in the sense in which negation is the ground of our ability to tell them apart; this they have in common with all pairs of opposites.”

²²*Monologion*, 1. I am using Jasper Hopkins's translation of Saint Anselm's works. Anselm of Canterbury, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000).

Mackie's claim (b) that evil is what good necessarily eliminates. To eliminate is to be a cause of "not being." It is thereby also a refutation of Mackie's antagonistic view of good and evil more generally.

Saint Anselm and "Non-being"

It might seem odd that Saint Anselm would demonstrate that God cannot be the "cause of not-being." The very question "can not-being have a cause?" would seem to generate the sort of aporetic game for which medievals have often justly been criticized.²³ Despite its apparent oddity, the issue was of great concern to Anselm, and for two primary reasons. First, the claim that "God is the cause of not-being" would reify "not-being," and Anselm was sensitive to the wide-spread theological implications of the reification of not-being. Second, the claim "God is the cause of not-being" would, he thought, apparently make God the cause of evil, which was repugnant to him.

The reification of non-being was an important issue for Saint Anselm. He goes to great lengths to show some of its theological implications in the *Monologion*. Were nothing something, he claims there, *omnibus quae supra disposita sunt, opponitur* ["all that I thought I had concluded about the Supreme Being is nothing"] (M 8).²⁴ That is, God would not be *maxime omnium* ["that which exists most greatly of all"], *[id quod] solum [est] per se ipsum* ["that which alone exists through itself"], that through which *cuncta quae sunt, sunt* ["all things exist"] (M 3)²⁵ and so on. Anselm's point here is not just that the claim that "nothing is something" is contradictory and that a universe in which contradictory statements are true would be a universe in which nothing is true, although there was enough of the logician in Anselm for him to have enjoyed this sort of argument. There is also an implicit theological point embedded in his claim. If nothing is something, then that out of which God created the universe would be something. This, in turn, would imply either that there is something that does not exist through God, or that God created nothing. The latter case is either absurd, or it leads to an infinite regress.²⁶ The former implies that there

²³One such game could be this. It seems self-evident that everything that has a cause must be. Thus, were not-being to have a cause, it too would have to be. But this is clearly a contradiction. Not-being by definition cannot be. Consequently, not-being cannot have a cause. But if not-being cannot have a cause, one might continue, nothing can cause not-being. And if nothing can cause not-being, nothing can cease to be. Thus, all that is is necessarily. But this too is patently absurd. And so on.

²⁴*Monologion*, 8: "Accordingly, since what was nothing would be something, that which was most greatly something would be nothing. For from the fact that I found a certain Substance that exists most greatly of all, I rationally inferred that all things other [than this Substance] were made by it in such way that they were made from nothing. Therefore, if that from which they were made (which I believed to be nothing) is something, then all that I thought I had concluded about the Supreme Being is nothing."

²⁵Cf. *Monologion*, 3: "Since, then, all existing things exist through one thing, without doubt this one thing exists through itself. Thus, all existing things other [than this one] exist through something other [than themselves]; and this one alone exists through itself. But whatever exists through something other [than itself] exists less than that which alone exists through itself and through which all other things exist. Accordingly, that which exists through itself exists most greatly of all. Therefore, there is some one thing which alone exists most greatly of all and most highly of all."

²⁶To be clear, the claim is absurd if by "nothing" one means "not-something." Nothing is not and cannot be created. The claim leads to an infinite regress, on the other hand, if by "nothing" one means something. It would imply that God must create something through which he creates.

is something as eternal as God, and over which God has no control. Both cases are unacceptable to classical creationist metaphysics. They would contradict its most basic tenet: that God is that through which all things exist.

As for the second problem, within “Is God the cause of not-being?” there is also a masked question: does God cause evil?²⁷ This question too was essential to Saint Anselm. His own creationist metaphysics apparently called for God to be the cause of evil. That is, if *neque factor neque quod factum est potest habere aliquid nisi ab ipso factore* [“neither the Creator nor what has been created can exist except from the Creator Himself”] (*DCD*, 1), and if evil exists, then it would seem to follow that evil cannot exist *nisi ab ipso factore* [“except from the Creator”]. Thus, God would apparently seem to be the cause of evil.

There is a sense, of course, in which Anselm had to accept this conclusion. If God is the condition of the possibility of the existence of all that is, then He must also be the condition of the possibility of the existence of such things as betrayal, suffering, or any other evil. It is also the case, however, that it is repugnant to think that an omnipotent good being, whom Anselm thought of as Goodness itself, causes evil directly. Anselm’s concern at the outset of the *Casu Diaboli*, as such, is to show that God’s being the condition of the possibility of evil does not entail that He himself is the direct cause of evil. This is, of course, the central problem of the *Casu Diaboli* itself: to show how one can reconcile the existence of evil in a world in which God is “all in all.” Since Anselm thought of evil as a privation of the good, he formulated his concern in terms of non-being.

Anselm and the Two Senses of “To Cause Not to Be”

The fact that we experience things that “pass from being to not-being” would apparently imply that not-being has a cause. If God is the cause of all that is, Anselm’s *discipulus* asks as such, is He not the cause of not-being?

Who but God causes the many things that we see passing from being to not-being not to be what they were, even if they do not pass altogether into nothing? Or who causes-not-to-be whatever is not except Him who causes-to-be all that is? Likewise, if there is something only because God causes it, then it follows that what-is-not is not because He does not cause it. Therefore, just as those things that exist have from Him their being something, so those things that do not exist, or that pass from being to not-being, seem to have from Him their being nothing. (*DCD*, 1)

Anselm begins his response to the question by distinguishing between two different senses of “causing not-to-be” that he claims are parallel to two different senses of “causing to be.” In the first or “proper” sense, which I shall call *actual causality*, Anselm claims, to “cause to be” refers to that which actually “causes-to-be what is not.” That is, it refers to the efficient cause, or what we might call the necessary and sufficient condition, of being. Thus, in this first or “proper” sense, he states,

²⁷See on this point the introduction by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson to Anselm of Canterbury, *Truth, Freedom, and Evil: Three Philosophical Dialogues* (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 44–45. Anselm explicitly links not-being and evil in the first chapter of the *De Casu*. See footnote 28.

to “cause not-to-be” refers to the efficient cause, or to the necessary and sufficient condition, of something’s ceasing to be: to that which actually “causes not-to-be what is.” In the second, or “improper” sense, which I shall call *absent causality*, on the other hand, Anselm claims that “to cause to be” refers to that which “is able to cause something not to be and does not.” That is, it refers to the absence of an actual efficient cause—the necessary and sufficient condition—of not-being. Thus, in the “improper” sense, to “cause not-to-be” refers to the absence of an actual efficient cause—necessary and sufficient condition—of being: to that which is “able to cause something to be but does not.” He illustrates the difference between the *actual* and *absent* causality of not-being through the case of “causing someone not to be clothed.” The “despoiler,” the person who actually strips a person of his clothes, is the *actual* cause of that person’s not being clothed, of his nakedness. A bystander, who could but does not stop the “despoiler,” on the other hand, is the *absent* cause of that person’s not being clothed, of his nakedness. Having made this distinction, Anselm claims that God can only be said to cause not-being in the second sense: that God can only be the *absent* cause of “not-being.”

In this [improper] mode God is said to cause many things that He does not cause. For example, He is said to lead into temptation because He does not keep from temptation, although He is able [to keep from temptation]. And [He is said] to cause what-is-not not to be because He does not cause it to be, although He is able [to cause it to be]. But if you consider existing things: when they pass to not-being, God does not cause them not to be.

He believes that if one analyzes the relation between God and creation, it will be evident that God cannot be an *actual* cause of not-being.

Anselm and Why God is Not “the Cause of Not-being”

God is the *actual* cause of the being of all things: He “causes-to-be what is not.” He is the efficient cause—the necessary and sufficient condition—of the existence of all that is.

For not only does no other being exist except by His creating, but also a being cannot at all remain what it was made except by His conserving. (DCD, 1)

But that which is the *actual* cause of the being of all that is cannot at one and the same time be the *actual* cause of the not-being of anything. If it were, that cause would simultaneously be the *actual* cause of the being and not-being of one and the same thing, and that would be contradictory. That is, if that which is the necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of something were also the necessary and sufficient condition of that thing’s non-existence, then that condition would at once be the necessary and sufficient condition of existence and non-existence, which is clearly contradictory. Thus, if God is the actual cause of the being of all that is, He cannot be the actual cause of the not-being of anything at all.

The point here can be made in a different way. If it is indeed contradictory for one and the same cause simultaneously to be the *actual* cause of both the being

and not-being of one and the same thing, then if God were the *actual cause* of the not-being of something, He would necessarily not be the *actual cause* of the being of all that is. But *ex hypothesi* were God not the *actual cause* of the being of all that is, God would not be God. Consequently, God cannot be the *actual cause* of the not-being of anything.

What this means, of course, is that if God can be said to be the cause of not-being, which Anselm does not doubt,²⁸ it can only be because He is the *absent cause* of not-being. That is, He can only be said to cause not-being because He “is able to cause something not to be and does not.” Anselm comments thus:

Therefore, when He ceases to conserve what He has created, then that thing that existed returns to not-being, not because He causes it not to be but because He ceases to cause it to be. When as though angered, God removes being by destroying something, not-being is not from Him. But when He reclaims as His own what He had bestowed, then the thing that was created by Him, and by Him was being conserved in existence, returns unto not-being, which it had not from Him but from itself before it was created. (*DCD*, 1)

Anselm draws a tight series of conclusions from his claim that God cannot be the *actual cause* of not-being. These serve primarily as rebuttals of the errors that he thought derived from the claim that that God is the *actual cause* of not-being.

If God cannot be the *actual cause* of the elimination of things, Anselm claims, He cannot be a destructive force: *ita a summa essentia non est nisi essentia* [“so from the Supreme Being comes only being”]. But if, as Anselm posits at the beginning of the chapter, *neque factor neque quod factum est potest habere aliquid nisi ab ipso factore* [“neither the Creator nor what has been created can exist except from the Creator Himself”], then, since not-being is not “from God,” *nihil ergo et non esse sicut non est essentia* [“nothing and not-being are not beings”].

There is more. If nothing “can exist except from the Creator,” not-being is not “from God,” and if from God *non est nisi bonum* [“only good comes”], then *omnis essentia bonum* [“every being is a good thing”]. What this means is that evil can only be a privation.

3. FREEING EVIL FROM THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

It is clear that Saint Anselm’s argument goes to the heart of Mackie’s a-theological argument. If God cannot be a destructive force, then surely Mackie’s claim (b) that evil is that which the good must eliminate must be false. With (b), so too must Mackie’s claim that evil is one of a pair of “mutually opposed forces”—that the conjunction of (b) and (d) must be false. And if (b) and (d) are false, then Mackie’s reasons for holding (a) and (c) are certainly tenuous. The point here is that Saint Anselm demonstrates that Mackie’s entire view of the nature of evil is more than

²⁸Cf. *De Casu*, 1: “Be careful not at all to think—when we read in Scripture, or when in accordance with Scripture we say, that God causes evil or causes not-being—that I am denying the basis for what is said or am finding fault with its being said. But we ought not to cling to the verbal impropriety concealing the truth as much as we ought to attend to the true propriety hidden beneath the many types of expression.”

questionable. If this is so, then surely Mackie's a-theological argument cannot be sound: Mackie's definition of evil is crucial to that argument, as he himself admits.

This does not make the problem of evil disappear. Evil is a disheartening reality, and the problems that it poses do not disappear simply because one points out that a specific view of its nature is untenable. Saint Anselm's objections do, however, allow those of us who reflect upon evil to focus on the true heart of the *aporiai* posed by evil. That heart cannot lie in the apparent contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of God and in the subsequent claim that evil can be viewed as logical or positive evidence of the non-existence of God. The very thought that evil could be so thought of would have been absurd to Saint Anselm. If God is the necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of all beings, then He must also be the necessary condition of those beings who become evil in some way, of those beings to whom evil can in some way be predicated: of those who are miserable and those who suffer, of those who torture and those who betray. What this means is that evil can never serve as "positive evidence" of the non-existence of God. Evil presupposes the existence of God. Evil is a secondary reality. But secondary realities cannot be evidence of the non-existence of primary realities, those realities from which they derive. No, the problem of evil lies in evil itself, precisely because the necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of those beings who become evil is good, and it is a mystery how anything for whose existence good is necessary and sufficient condition can become evil. *Si quidem Deus, unde mala?*